THE WORKERS' RESOLVE

AN INTERVIEW
WITH
W. A. APPLETON

(By JOSEPH W. GRIGG, of the "New York World.")

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THE WORKERS' RESOLVE

An Interview with W. A. Appleton, Secretary of the General Federation of Trades Unions, by Joseph W. Grigg, Special Staff Correspondent of the "New York World."

"The British workman—and workmen constitute 85 per cent. of the British fighting forces—entered the war to defend Belgium. The complete restoration of Belgium is, above all else, the principal thing for which he is still fighting."

This statement was made to me to-day by W. A. Appleton, Secretary of the General Federation of Trades Unions, and the spokesman of an organisation comprising more than a million members. He is well known to the labour leaders of America, and has on a number of occasions made a close study of labour problems in America. Through the "World" Mr. Appleton sends this message to the workers of America:—

"The cup of Belgium's sorrows is full to overflowing. She has little left but her indomitable spirit. She must of necessity look to her Allies for redemption, and I would beg of all the workers of America, whether they be men or women, that they will permit neither political prejudice nor personal convenience, nor personal gain, to stand in the way of their efforts to bind

up the wounds of Belgium, to restore her to her place amongst the nations, and to secure that her children shall know that the sacrifices she made were not in vain."

Mr. Appleton has just returned from France, where he heard the opinions of both French and Belgian leaders on the deportations of Belgians. He said:—

"I found the workers overwhelmed at the fresh outrage perpetrated by the Germans against already oppressed Belgians. Not content with destroying and violating and turning Belgium into a prison, or forcing the unhappy remnants who remain to endure insult and to pay continual contributions towards the war costs of their enemies, they have deported 50,000, and are compelling these to undertake tasks which have for their object the strengthening of Germany's power still further to assail civilisation."

To my question whether or not there had been exaggeration in the reports of the extent of the deportations or the methods employed by the Germans, the British labour leader replied:—

"No exaggeration is possible when speaking of the brutality with which Germany has treated Belgium. Homes have been broken up, and to the mental agony which every Belgian suffers when compelled to work for the profit and advancement of his enemy is now added this further breaking up of home-ties and the uncertainty of the women as to the destination of their men,

and on the part of the men, as to the sufferings and fate of their women.

"I am sure it is quite impossible for the American workpeople, secure in their land and away from the sound of the guns, to understand fully the physical and mental agony which Belgium has endured, is enduring, and which is being accentuated by Germany's latest contemptuous disregard of all humanitarian convention and practice. While they cannot understand all the agony that is being endured, I am satisfied that they have only to apprehend the bare facts of the present outrage in order to give of their profoundest sympathy and their greatest help."

Mr. Appleton then emphasised most emphatically the conditions on which German workers could expect, after the war, to have British workers associate with them in the International Labour Movement with which Mr. Appleton has long been associated. He added:—

"There are men in the British labour movement who have been in touch with the German labour movement, but I do not see how it would be possible for them to continue to resume their association with Germans. Such a thing may be possible, but it appears to me to be extremely improbable. I am satisfied from my own personal knowledge of Great Britain, and from my association with British workpeople, that those who condone the frightfulness of Germany are very few in number, and that they represent only

the smallest minority of the working-class thought of this country. I have studied the innate sense of justice and right which characterises even the roughest of the workers of Great Britain, and I am satisfied that neither now, nor in the future, will they tolerate association with the German working-class movement, unless the German working-class movement immediately and forcibly repudiates the dastardly acts of the German Government."

When I suggested that it had been argued by some labour men in this country that it was the German Government and not the people who were responsible for Germany's action, Mr. Appleton replied:—

"A people cannot wholly rid itself of responsibility for the crimes of its Government. Even in a country like Germany, where liberal institutions are in their infancy, public opinion could powerfully interpose if it chose to do so. And unless the Social Democratic Party take a definite and effective stand, I cannot understand the possibility of workers in civilised communities associating again with German workmen—that is, in my lifetime."

In June, 1914, Mr. Appleton was in Germany. I asked him what struck him most at that time.

"Why, Sassenbach, the German labour leader, told me that he would be glad to have British workers come to Germany to meet the German

labour leaders and discuss labour issues and study German methods. 'But,' he declared emphatically, 'we don't want any more of Jouhaux' peace conferences.' Jouhaux was Secretary of the French Federation of Trades Unions. I also was struck with the fact that in Berlin there were 22 per cent. of skilled but then unemployed metal workers. We had only 3 per cent. when war broke out. No wonder Sassenbach did not want any more peace conferences!"

When I asked the British labour leader what attitude the British workers would take toward the workers of the nations allied to Germany, he quickly answered:—

"The same action will not be adopted. These are accessories of Germany's infamies, and I desire to believe that they are very often unwilling accessories, and that if they had the power they would conduct their campaigns with more regard to the amenities of war as practised by civilised nations."

Mr. Appleton has no fears that the outrages on Belgium will weaken or destroy the Belgian sense of nationality.

"You cannot break the spirit of a people whose soldiers faced the first onrush of the German armies, and whose workmen sang the national song at the bayonet point while being deported in cattle cars."

In concluding his interview with me, Mr. Appleton warned American labour that the

Germans were trying to distort the action taken by the British organised labour lately, in rejecting the proposal of the American Federation of Labour for a labour peace conference when the nations entered into a peace conference.

"We thought it would be impracticable," said the British labour leader. "What we suggested was that labour should make known its terms in advance of any peace conference, and this we did when we sent our terms to Mr. Asquith. The British workpeople are now setting aside everything to win the war. When it is over, then we will have something to say. But the war now resembles a fight I saw on the East Side a few days ago. The crowd was yelling for a little man to let his big opponent get up from the ground where the small man had him pinned. The small fellow shouted back, 'No, it took too long to get him there!' I hope the American people will see this war in the same light. The British workpeople are committed to a task which they expect to carry through."

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